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MR. HARBEN'S GEORGIA FICTION.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

PROBABLY each of us is significantly born in this place or that, of one color or another, and Jew, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist or Shintooist, as the case may be. But so far as anything of interest or importance happens from us, we might most of us have come into the world at one place as well as another and under conditions wholly different from those actually attending our nativity. As a matter of fact, vast multitudes of us take our destiny into our own hands at a given period, and defeat whatever were the prenatal designs without apparently disturbing the equilibrium of the cosmos, or seriously interfering with the imaginable purposes of the Deity in creating us native Irish, Germans, Russians or Italians when we become adoptive Americans. But this is in the region of politics or economics, and if we come to look at a man in his relation to æsthetics, we perceive a certain inalienable propriety in his being of this origin rather than that. Not to go abroad for instances, where they abound in the sharper national and racial divisions of Europe, I think we can see good reasons for Mr. Cable deriving from New Orleans, or Joel Chandler Harris from Atlanta, or Miss Murfree (in the mask of Charles Egbert Craddock) from Eastern Tennessee, or Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, Mr. Henry B. Fuller, Mr. George Ade, Miss Edith Wyatt, Mr. Hamlin Garland, Mr. Will Payne, or Mr. Brand Whitlock, and others yet from the Middle West, or Sarah O. Jewett, or Mrs. Wilkins Freeman from New England. If the occurrence of so potently characterizing a Chicagoan as Mr. Robert Herrick at Cambridge must give us pause in the flow of our speculations, it is doubtless to enable us to note the rule in an exception. Certainly in the extraordinary development of local literature among us, ever since the Pacific Slope began to express

itself in the peculiar colors and cadences of its romances and poets (who were none of them born on its declivities because they were all born too soon), we have to confess an apparent divinity in the geographical distribution of American authorship. I will not go back for proof of my thesis to those great New-Englanders and less New-Yorkers of an earlier generation, who may be imagined looking down with their respective misgivings upon their successors since swarming into print from every school district throughout the country; but I think we can discern in all our decentralized authors a congenital fitness for the work they have done for the life of their different sections. In this sort of work there has seemed to me the highest promise of a national literature and in the devotion, the æsthetic patriotism, if I may reach out for a meaning rather beyond the phrase, I have read the prophecy of something finely and finally American. If the reader will try to think what the state of polite learning (as they used to call it in the eighteenth century) would now be among us, if each of our authors had studied to ignore, as they have each studied to recognize, the value of the character and tradition nearest about them, I believe he will agree with me that we owe everything that we now are in literature to their instinct of vicinage. For my own part I have delighted to find myself at home in every part of the Republic through the truth of these far or near fellow citizens, who made me aware of being, in virtue of my mere Americanism, almost my mere mortality, the friend and neighbor of the people they made me acquainted with.

But there are more intimate reasons yet for my feeling at home in their hospitable pages. It was a good many years ago that I drove away from the station in Chicago with a family party in one of Mr. Fuller's novels and found myself very comfortably akin to them through the reality with which he had ascertained them Middle-Western people; and just the other day, when I was reading the faithful fiction of Mr. Will N. Harben, I was agreeably surprised to find myself rather North-Georgian through a community of many social traits. I perceived how largely the South, at least in its newer and simpler life, had characterized the Middle-Western region where I was born. I met in his stories manners and customs and even ideals which were more familiar to my boyhood than those of the East. But it is of

contemporary Georgia that Mr. Harben is always writing, and it is the pioneer period still persistent there, but long past in Southern Ohio, that he is always describing, with its wild passions, its fights and frolics, its intensely personalized religious experiences, its beliefs unshaken by modern question, its exaggerated sense of honor. Since my earlier day New England has come in with the arts and letters and transformed my native region out of all likeness to his. New England will go to Georgia, too, in her good time, with something better than child-labor in the factories; she has, in fact, already gone there with industrial schools for the blacks, and no doubt she will bring to the whites humaner ideals and gentler customs than they have evolved for themselves.

Of all our localists, as I may call the type of American writers whom I think the most national, no one has done things more expressive of the life he was born to than Mr. Harben. He was known by his sketches and stories of Northern Georgia before he conceived the notion of portraying his old neighborhoods in the dimensions of that sort of human comedy which every writer attempts sooner or later. But some ten years since he gave a hostage to criticism in fiction of mature stature and manly make, which he has redeemed again and again by his subsequent novels. That first novel, a tale of cruel love and morbid conscience, has been followed by eight others of like dimensions and textures: "Ann Boyd," "Abner Daniel," "The Substitute," "The Georgians," "Pole Baker," "Mam' Linda," "Gilbert Neal" and "The Redemption of Kenneth Galt," all except the last concerned with character racy of the soil and native to the air and sky. I shall first have done with this last in saying that I do not think it comparable to the others; it affects me like a labor done at the suggestion of ill-advised friends who wish their novelist to prove himself capable of higher art than that highest art of all, which is the realization of genuine life on the levels so mistakenly supposed to be low. This is sometimes the erring ambition of the novelist himself, and when he fails in it he fails to his honor and advantage. I am disposed to congratulate Mr. Harben on his failure with the factitious people of his latest fiction; he was built for truer work. At its truest his work is masterly, but I will not say that even in his best novels it is of a sustained mastery. It is apt to falter from a mistaken

ideal of fiction as something to be kept interesting by abnormal activity of plot, instead of following the vital suggestions of reality. In the world of morals it is not the things which go into a man which defile him or cleanse him, but the things that come out of him; and in the world of imagination it is not what happens to a character, but what happens from him that counts. If Mr. Harben, for instance, could have sustained his story of "Westerfelt" on the level of its opening chapters, he would have created a masterpiece worthy of the great modern Spaniards or Russians, and rare in our besotted Anglo-Saxon fiction, where it is supposed that the actions and not the emotions are the drama. At times throughout he does return to that level, and the tale is always simply faithful to the unsophisticated circumstance of its people; but it is not so constant to it as to merit the praise I should like to give. I could not praise it too much for the strength and courage with which it portrays the anguish of the poor girl who drowns herself, and the bitter hate of the mother for the man who had forgotten rather than slighted her. Afterwards there is something fine in the way the mother's rancor loses itself in her better knowledge of the facts, and the story is bravely true to life in its course away from the tragic beginning to the fortunate ending; a weaker hand might have left it steeped in gloom. Mr. Harben is apt to save himself from the reproach of romanticism by honest dealing with his material when the temptation to dishonesty would be too strong for an art less simple and less wise than his. Where his artificiality comes in is through his obedience to an elder tradition of romance, but there are not many such hints of his reading in his writing. His people talk as if they had not been in books before, and they talk all the more interestingly because they have for the most part not been "in society," or ever will be. They express themselves, without straining for dialect, in the neighborly parlance which their experience and their observation have not transcended, and they express themselves with a fury of fun, of pathos and profanity which is native to their region.

In all countries the Southerner seems to be the same in his difference from the Northerner, but in our own South the average man has been characterized by the habit of slavery, and this habit still lingers, after the fact of slavery, in the violence of the whites towards one another and their obduracy toward the

negroes. For the most part Mr. Harben's Northern Georgians are of the poor white class, who were not slaveholders, but who seem to have more than halved the slaveholders' contempt and cruelty in their attitude toward the subject race. They are small farmers, who till their own land; they are pioneers; they are backwoodsmen almost in the hunting and trapping stage; they are illicit distillers; they are traders, tending by instinct to the mountain towns, where they enter commercial life, with an ambition for the great business activity of Atlanta, their metropolis. The storekeeper is the plutocrat of the region, not surpassed in social dignity by the lawyer; he is the ultimate equal of the obsolescent aristocrat, the man of old family, without ceasing to be the friend and neighbor of the mountaineer farmer who trades with him and guards a jealous pride even in the toils of mortgage. In all Mr. Harben's stories some type of this mercantile magnate occurs; he is the new force, and very interesting in his relation to the strength of the ancient conservatism. The equality to which he lends himself, and which seems to shape the whole social fabric, is more formal than real, but still it is truer equality than ever pervaded the New England village life. In fact, whatever equality is rife among us in the enormous disparity of fortunes, is from the South rather than the North, where the ideal was always liberty, a barren and effectual thing without equality.

The mountain folk who live in the books of this novelist almost as palpably as in the shadow of their native woods or on the slopes of their rocky hills, in the log cabin of the pioneer times, or the yet ruder and more provisional shack of the first settler, or the unfinished frame house of the universal American farmer, are far simpler people than the village merchants. Their days are divided between killing toil and wild riot, and their virtues are of the same excess as their vices. It is a condition in which religion holds the sway which it seems to have lost elsewhere; the man who is not a church member is a lost soul even in this life; and the preacher is of a mystical power and influence unknown in civilized communities. He is a frequent figure in the stories, and the author has not hesitated to show him sometimes brutal, cruel, in his fanaticism, and sometimes coarse even to the verge of indecency. The passions are lords among these primitive people: avarice, envy, hate, revenge, lust, ambition, rule the men of Mr. Harben's Georgian mountaineers as they rule

Mr. Phillpotts's Devonshire moormen, and the like sort of virulent pietism passes for religion among both. But there is not wanting to either a depth of conscience, a power of good-will which transforms their creeds to a faith of sublime effect. One notable difference is that the mountaineers know nothing of the corroding doubts of the moormen, who are sometimes turned from Christians to Agnostics by the subtle and far-reaching intimations of modern science. So far as I recall the range of character in Mr. Harben's fiction, there is not even one of the old-fashioned Infidels, such as used to shake the souls of Northern villagers with the terrors of their cynicism. Good and bad are alike believers, and religion, in the absence of education, is the sole check on evil.

It is a check only too feeble when the passions are astir, and especially when the homicidal fury breaks out in the lonely fields or the shabby village streets. Then the old grudges are fought to the death with rifle or pistol, and the point of honor inflamed by real or fancied insult goads kindly men to sudden murder. The sum of bloodshed in these books is perhaps greater than the sum of any other one fact, but it would be unjust to the people among whom it mounts to such awful massacre not to realize, from the author's witness, that they have a real sense of homicide. More than one case of lifelong remorse lends its tragic gloom to his page, and is not the less affecting because it is expressed in natures of primitive simplicity, influenced by faith of child-like implicitness. Such a case is that of Hillyer in "The Substitute," who in early manhood has killed his friend in a flash of drunken frenzy, and who expiates his misdeed by a lifetime of endeavor at reparation, forever prostrating himself to a just and merciless God. The author's divination of the true way out for the wretched man is something uncommonly true and fine in fiction, where questions of the kind are so commonly begged, and his psychological reach over the lowly levels of life to the heights where men live in the spirit is certainly not the less striking because the life is that of common men and women.

Each of his stories moves from some strong central impulse and is in a way, not too obvious, epical. In his diction and in his conception of superficial character he is often prosaic enough, but in his psychological moments he is a poet of genuine quality. He makes no apparent effort to lift his material into a light where it will be more imaginable to readers of a higher

civilization; you take it on the level where he finds it or not at all. In fact, it is hard to say how much or little he is himself detached from it in his ideals; but it may be a "good fault" of his unconsciousness that he sometimes seems trammelled in his conditions and might be accused of admiring the things that his characters admire. Yet when it comes to any test this ethical sense is unclouded, and he holds the balance between right and wrong with a steady hand. He does not fail of justice to the worst and meanest of the people he portrays, and the effect of his justice is so convincing that you must accept his portrait as a study of conditions uncommon if not unsurpassed in Anglo-Saxon literature.

It is not part of my purpose to instance or analyze his different books. They are of one quality, though not one unvarying quality, such as derives from reality. He seldom loses himself in the factitious, and I should say at a go that he never loses himself in it when he is portraying the character of women. His women are all of a lifelikeness so convincing that you may, or may not, surprise yourself at last in the belief that the redemption of the South from the long delirium of slavery will be through the political importance of women. The recognition of this importance must come everywhere; when it comes to the women of the South, it will find them fitted for their old rights and their new duties as few other women in the world are fitted. The unrivalled freedom of Southern women, in all the avatars of womanhood from girlhood on, has given them power elsewhere unknown, with a trust from men that is almost pathetically entire (save for the jealousy inherent in Southern natures), and exalted by an ideal of chivalry vain and weak enough, but not ignoble. I do not think of any woman in Mr. Harben's fiction who is misimagined or imagined from a false conception of her relation to man. She is often enough in that world, as in this, silly, vain, false, vacillating; but she is also true, brave, good and constant, quite beyond the merit of the men who love her. I should not wish to instance Ann Boyd, in the novel of that name, as a faultlessly heroic character, but it is hard to keep from calling her sublime in the successive developments of her nature, which are always toward the light given her by experience. What one may safely say is that she is a great creature, and if she never was, that she is most worthy to have been

I say this, reserving my regret that in a last most difficult moment she is lent to the necessities of a melodramatic situation which does not seem to me a necessity of the author.

But, after all, though we may admire and enjoy Mr. Harben's success with individual figures, it is his power of handling conditions and imparting a sense of social situation that is most to be valued. His corner of that strange "new South," which is still for us such a *terra incognita* after our many inquiries and conjectures, is alive with what we feel to be genuine interests and real emotions. The past is shown us interpenetrated not only with the present, but with the future; novel and bold enterprises are turning from dreams to actions, and the people of an antefeudal civilization are seizing their significances with an avidity and strength, and adapting them to their ideals with an eagerness and intelligence not surpassed in communities more consciously modern. Together with these effects are the lingering superstitions and the fading illusions of other days, and often amid the latter-day actualities of Mr. Harben's scene we come upon the affirmations of the mistaken Confederate patriotism, which cannot accept the conclusions it cannot hope to question. This has its pathos, its dignity. At the same time one reflects that even failure cannot consecrate error.

W. D. HOWELLS.